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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NI](#) [THIRDM](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: VICE PRESIDENT ATIKU CONVINCED  
PRESIDENT OBASANJO WILL TRY ANYTHING TO STAY IN OFFICE

Classified By: Campbell, John, Ambassador, Abuja, State  
Reason(s): 1.5 (b),(d).

REFS: (A) ABUJA 1845, (B) ABUJA 1703, (C), ABUJA 1635,  
(D) LAGOS 1363, (E) LONDON 7934

1. (S) Summary: Atiku believes that President Obasanjo will try anything to stay in power past 2007, including exploiting unrest in the Delta and the Bakassi dispute to justify postponement of the elections. The Vice President fears that he himself could be assassinated. Atiku wants the U.S. and the UK to issue clear statements of opposition to Obasanjo staying in power through any unconstitutional or extra-constitutional means. He said his people are in contact with members of the U.S. Congress and the UK House of Commons to achieve this end. Atiku has hired political consultants, both British and American, to support his candidacy, and has a working group that monitors the domestic print and electronic media. As a result, he continued, he has a much better sense of the grassroots than any of his presidential rivals. President Obasanjo, by contrast, is largely ignorant of Nigerian public opinion. Nevertheless, Atiku said, the current U.S. Department of Justice investigation of his involvement with Congressman Jefferson must be over by the end of the first quarter of 2006 if he is to remain a viable candidate. Atiku anticipates the breakup of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the coming months, and he expects to lead a new party, leaving Obasanjo with control of only a "shell" of the PDP. End summary.

2. (C) At his request, Vice President Atiku met with me alone at the residence the evening of October 1 -- Nigeria's independence day. Earlier, he had represented President Obasanjo at the National Lecture given by Prof. Joy Ogwu, and, as the senior Muslim in the government, had presided over religious ceremonies at the National Mosque. However, he said he had not been invited to the changing of the guard ceremony at the Villa and the subsequent reception hosted by President Obasanjo for the diplomatic corps.

3. (S) Atiku said that the current political struggle in Nigeria is between the "military elite" and the "political elite" (himself, certain governors, members of the national legislature) for power. However, cutting across this paradigm is Obasanjo's effort to remain in power past 2007. So, while Obasanjo rules in the "style" of a weak military dictator and is the product of the "military elite," his ambitions have alienated his erstwhile military allies. When I observed that the current constitution prohibited a third term and that the President had stated repeatedly that he had no intention of staying after 2007, Atiku said that Obasanjo's behavior, especially within the PDP, belies those sentiments. Atiku said flatly that Obasanjo intends to manipulate the political process to stay in office. When I observed that the President's current unpopularity made his reelection moot, Atiku observed that Nigeria's presidents are selected by manipulation of the political process, not by vote totals. The Vice President then sketched out a scenario by which the President through carrots and sticks succeeds in winning the support of a majority of governors due to leave office in 2007, and thereby losing their immunity to the civil and criminal prosecution that would certainly follow. These governors, in turn, would call on their National Assembly patronage networks to ensure the necessary amendment of the constitution. If that strategy fails, and Atiku was confident it would, then Obasanjo might seek to create an atmosphere of national emergency by exploiting endemic unrest in the Delta and or the unresolved Bakassi dispute to justify postponement of the elections. And, Atiku hinted, there are other, more sinister scenarios. The way out of all these depressing scenarios, Atiku continued, is to convince Obasanjo that a third term is impossible.

4. (S) Within Nigeria, Atiku said, the effort to convince

Obasanjo to step down would be initiated by a public statement opposing a third term signed by Gen. Babangida, Gen. Buhari, Gen. Aliyu Mohammed, himself, and perhaps others from the North. Outside Nigeria, Atiku is looking for a clear statement from the U.S. and UK also opposing an extra-legal third term. To that end, Atiku continued, "his people" (presumably his lobbyists and agents) are working closely with interested MP's in the House of Commons. He said his people have excellent access to the Foreign Office, less so to the Prime Minister's office. In the U.S., he continued, the strategy is similar. His people are talking to members of Congress, who are starting to become involved. He referred to a recent letter from Sen. McCain, and said there will soon be others.

15. (S) In this context, Atiku continued, he had been warned by "official" UK sources and by his private "American consultants" that his life is in danger. He has asked the Director General (DG) of the State Security Service for augmentation of his security arrangements. As yet, there has been no reply. And the DG is a Yoruba from Obasanjo's village. I observed that the DG reports to National Security Advisor Aliyu Mohammed; Atiku said that the NSA is able to exercise only nominal authority over the DG. He might, however, have alternative ways of strengthening the Vice President's security.

16. (C) Turning to the recent arrest of Dokubo Asari and the ongoing turmoil in the Delta, Atiku said that Asari should be treated as a criminal matter -- not political. The President, he continued, had made a mistake by negotiating with Asari in October, 2004. Now, Asari would be charged with some form of treason. With respect to a more fundamental solution to the Delta, Atiku said that the international community must assist in reducing the oil bunkering that fuels criminal enterprises. To that end, he continued, Nigeria needs international assistance to create a coast guard that could operate in the creeks as well as in the near-shore waters. He said he was familiar with Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) MD Kupolokun's "holistic" approach to the Delta, involving a partnership of the Federal and state governments, the Niger Delta Development Corporation (NDDC), the oil companies and foreign donors.

17. (S) Comment: The bottom line is that Atiku wants to be president in 2007 and believes that Obasanjo had promised to support him, first in 2003 and then for 2007. Atiku is not beyond manipulating the system and his foreign interlocutors to achieve his ambition. He feels personally betrayed by Obasanjo's failure to support his candidacy up to now. Yet, despite Atiku's absence from the Independence Day Changing of the Guard, the two continue to work together, at least in public. And, it is Atiku who is in charge, at least nominally, during Obasanjo's incessant travel. (Atiku believes he was snubbed by not being invited to the Independence Day Changing of the Guard; perhaps, but invitations here often go astray.) Atiku, like many others, is convinced that Obasanjo, at present, will stop at nothing to remain in power. However, many of our contacts say that the military/political establishment also will stop at nothing to prevent him from doing so -- even if it means violence. Atiku believes that a clear statement from the U.S. and the UK opposing a third term might help change Obasanjo's mind. Atiku has a sophisticated understanding of how the policy process works in London and Washington, and he said his agents are pushing for such a statement in both capitals. He is also asking for a joint meeting with the British High Commissioner and me, to which we have agreed.

18. (S) Comment, continued: Atiku, Babangida, Buhari and Marwa are rivals seeking the presidency. Atiku is in some ways the odd man out -- the only civilian. And Babangida emphasized to me that the next president of Nigeria must be from the military to preserve the state (Reftel A), sentiments with which Buhari and Marwa are likely to agree. Nevertheless, all four could well unite, if only momentarily, to oppose a third term for Obasanjo or a postponement of the change of leadership to be marked by the 2007 elections.

19. (S) Comment, continued: Obasanjo continues to say that he will leave office in 2007, a position reiterated by his close supporters (Reftel D). Atiku argues that Obasanjo's behavior, especially his manipulation of the PDP, is a clear indication of his intention to hang on to power. Like others, Atiku believes that Obasanjo is increasingly isolated from Nigerian realities and is consumed with the round of diplomatic activity associated with his role in the AU and ECOWAS. Atiku and others believe that Obasanjo does not know or understand how unpopular and discredited he is throughout Nigeria, that he actually believes the sycophants around him and other African heads of state who argue that he is indispensable.

Atiku's concerns about his own possible assassination recalls similar fears by the Lord Chief Justice when the Buhari suit challenging the 2003 elections was before the Supreme Court. Political life in Nigeria is violent in the best of times, more so in the run up to elections; Atiku's concerns, like those of Chief Justice Uwais, are real. Nevertheless, the British High Commissioner here has no knowledge of the "official British sources" that allegedly have warned Atiku that his life is in danger.

10. (S) Comment, continued: Atiku's comments about the likely breakup of the PDP recall those of Babangida (Reftel A). However, his view that the elections of 2007 are unlikely to reflect the will of the people is apparently more cynical than that of Babangida, who argues that the electoral process should be strengthened in practical and concrete ways. For Atiku, however, who will be the next President of Nigeria will apparently be decided without much reference to the electorate. It is premature to say whether it is Babangida or Atiku who is the most clear-eyed about the potential for the 2007 elections. However, the experiences of 1999 and 2003 do lend credibility to Atiku's misgivings. End comment.  
CAMPBELL